DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 620 FL 018 033

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TITLE The Linguistic Forms of the Request: How and When do Young Children Order or Suggest?
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Kansas City, MO, April 1989). Best copy available. Some paragraph headings may not reproduce well due to marginal legibility.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; *Child Language; Connected Discourse; *Discourse Analysis; Foreign Countries; *French; Language Acquisition; Language Patterns; Language Research; Oral Language; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS France; *Imperatives (Grammar); *Requests

ABSTRACT

A study designed to examine the variation that occurs in the request production of children between the ages of 6 and 7 observed the kind of requests children make, what they request, whom they ask, and how they formulate their ideas. Twenty native French-speaking children divided into two age groups (6- and 7-year-olds) were asked to complete two character comic strip stories in which the hero made a request to either a friend or an enemy. Requests were for either action or for information. In both age groups, children used direct form and embedded imperatives more often when the hero addressed a friend. The hero employed hints more frequently when he addressed the enemy. The 6-year olds produced more indirect utterances than did the 7-year-olds; however, the 7-year-olds evidenced a clear ability to produce a variety of reformulations. The report discusses the children's ability to link the linguistic form of request to the social features of production situation. (DJD)

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The linguistic forms of the request: how and when do young children order or suggest?

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1989 Biennal Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development - Kansas City, Missouri, USA - April 1989

FL018033

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SUMMARY

What changes take place in request production between the ages of 6 and 7? In other words, what do children ask for, whom do they ask, and how do they formulate their requests? Twenty children, native French-speaking children divided into 2 age groups (6 and 7 year old) were asked to complete 2-character comic-strip stories where the hero either made a request to a friend or an enemy. Requests were for action or for information. In both age groups, children tend to use the direct form and embedded imperatives more often when the hero addressed a friend. Hints were employed more frequently when addressing an enmeny. Requests for action were expressed primarily in both groups through direct requests,embedded imperatives and hints, whereas requests for information tended to take form of question directives. Surprisingly, 6 year olds produced more indirect requests than the 7-year-olds, and particularly produced more question directives and hints. Reformulations in the 6 year old group consisted of repeating the first request, whereas the 7 year old group evidenced clear ability to produce a variety of reformulations. These results form the basis for a psychological interpretation of earlier findings. Discussion enters on children's ability to link linguistic form of request to the social features of production situation.

AIMS

The present study was designated to examine variation in form of request in 6 and 7 year olds as a function of three features of the social situation: nature of the request, interlocutor status and refusal on the part of the interlocutor.

Two points will be explored.

a - The impact of interlocutor cooperativeness. In most the majority of existing studies, interlocutor status has been varied in terms of social hierarchy. The procedure used in the present study, which is fairly easy to implement, consist of assessing the psychological status (positive/negative relationship with the speaker) of interlocutors having identical social status.

b - A definition of categories of request behavior characterizing the psychosocial functionning of 6-7 year olds in one-to-one interactive situations. Non conventional indirect requests, including justifications or negotiation will be incorporated into this analysis in order to differentiate psychosocial factors motivating usage of direct requests from those motivating hints and justifications/negotiation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social interaction theory in the field of psychology forms the basis here for analysis of children's communicative development.

The linguistic basis for this study is the theory of speech acts.

METHOD

Subjects

Twenty native French-speaking children from middle and upper class backgrounds, participated in the experiment. These children are divided into two groups:

-10 6-year-old kindergarteners (mean age: 6;1; range 5;8 to 6;4)

-10 7-year-old first graders (mean age: 7;1; range 6;7 to 8;2).

Experimental design

There were 4 independent variables.

a- Nature of request: action request, information request (related samples);

b- Nature of social situation: request addressed to a positive interlocutor (friend) or request addressed to a negative interlocutor (ennemy) (related sample);

c- Reaction of addressee: comprehension or non comprehension of the request (related samples);

d- Age of subjects: 6 years, 7 years (independent samples).

Material and procedure

Twenty four aventure stories depicting familiar comic strips characters (for example Mickey Mouse) were devised. Each story was made up of three pictures (format 14 cm x 14 cm) (see table 2), each accompanied by a short text. In the first two pictures of each story, the hero is shown in interaction with another character. In the third picture, the hero is confronted with a difficult situation and must ask the other character for help. Subjects were asked to play the part of the hero, and make the request

for help (first production). The hero interact with either a positive character (for example a friend Dingo) or a negative character (for example an enemy The Horrible Kid). The request for help was either an action or an information request. In half of the cases, the interlocutor doesn't understand the request, and the experimenter invites the child to reformulate his/her first production (second production).

RESULTS

Analysis centers on the five more frequent types of requests: direct requests, embedded imperatives, directive questions, hints and negotiations/justifications.

Study of the first production

The mean percentage of responses per subject for each type of requests was calculated as a proportion over the total number of productions per subject.

The interaction between the factors nature of the request and type of request is significant ($F(4,72)=24,59$ $p<.0005$) (see Figure 2).

- The percentage of "direct order" is higher for information requests than for action requests. In contrast, the percentage of "hint" and "negotiation/justification" is higher for actions than for information.

- The percentage of "embedded imperative" is higher for actions than for information ($F(1,19)=61,93$ $p<.0005$).

- The percentage of "directive question" is higher for information than for actions ($F(1,19)=35,67$ $p<.0005$).

The interaction between the factors interlocutor's status and type of request is significant ($F(4,72)=12,70$ $p<.0005$) (see Figure 3).

- The percentage of "direct order" is higher when the request is made to a positive interlocutor than to a negative one. In contrast, the percentage of "hint" and "negotiation/justification" is higher when addressed to a negative interlocutor.

- The percentage of "embedded imperative" is higher when addressed to a positive interlocutor than with the negative interlocutor ($F(1,19)=9,74$ $p<.01$).

- The percentage of "directive question" is higher for requests to a negative interlocutor ($F(1,19)=9,77$ $p<.01$).

The interaction between the factors age and type of request is not significant. How ever partial comparisons indicate a number of interesting trends (see Figure 4) as regards the distribution pattern for percentages of types of request in each age group. This difference in distribution patterns between the six and seven year olds translates by the fact that six year olds produce less direct requests than seven year olds, and produce more "hint" and "negotiation/justification"; the six year olds produce more "embedded imperatives" than seven year olds, and fewer "directive question".

Study of the second production

Second productions were elicited by telling the child that the interlocutor has not understood the first request for help. Utterances were classified into seven reformulation categories (SEE Table 4). Numbers of each reformulation category appear in Table 4.

Six year olds produce more request-nonrequest reformulations than 7 year olds. In contrast seven year olds have greater recourse to use "please" ans

the nonconventional-nonconventional reformulations than 6 year olds. Note that in both age groups, approximately one third of the children opt for repetition on the second production. The findings also suggest that the second formulation can be modulated to be more or less polite.

DISCUSSION

Role of nature of requests

The subjects tend to produce more forms that can lead to negotiation (hints) or are designed to convinve the addressee (negotiation/justification) in action requests than in information requests.

Role of interlocutor status

Variation in form of request as a function of interlocutor status can also be interpreted in terms of speaker expectations of addresse's degree of cooperativeness. These findings produce variation in the form of the request along the (direct order) - (hint, negotiation/justification) axis and complete studies on the variation in interlocutor social status wich show that variation in requests forms is situated in most cases along (direct order) - (embedded imperative) axis.

Reformulation of requests

In line with the Axia et Baroni (1985) findings on reformulations of requests, the present results indicate first that up to the age of 6-7, the dominant tactic is to repeat the first request. However, two types of

reformulation not described in Axia et Baroni (1985) classification were here also emerged: direct requests on first production were transformed into indirect requests, and polite requests were modified into less polite requests. The present findings also reveal trends between the ages of 6 and 7 which not appear in the Axia et Baroni study: seven year ols as compared to 6 year olds exibit greater ability to make real reformulations of requests, greater ability to manipulate "please" by addition or suppression, and knowledge how to change a nonconvnetional request in another nonconventional request.

Role of age of subjects

Initial inspection of the data may suggest that six year olds differ from seven year olds in what Wilkinson, Calculator et Dollaghan (1982) have described as an adjustement between comprehensible message and one likely to be accepted by the interlocutor. Closer examination indicates however that 6 year olds tend to opt for acceptable message whereas 7 year olds prefer use a comprehensible one.

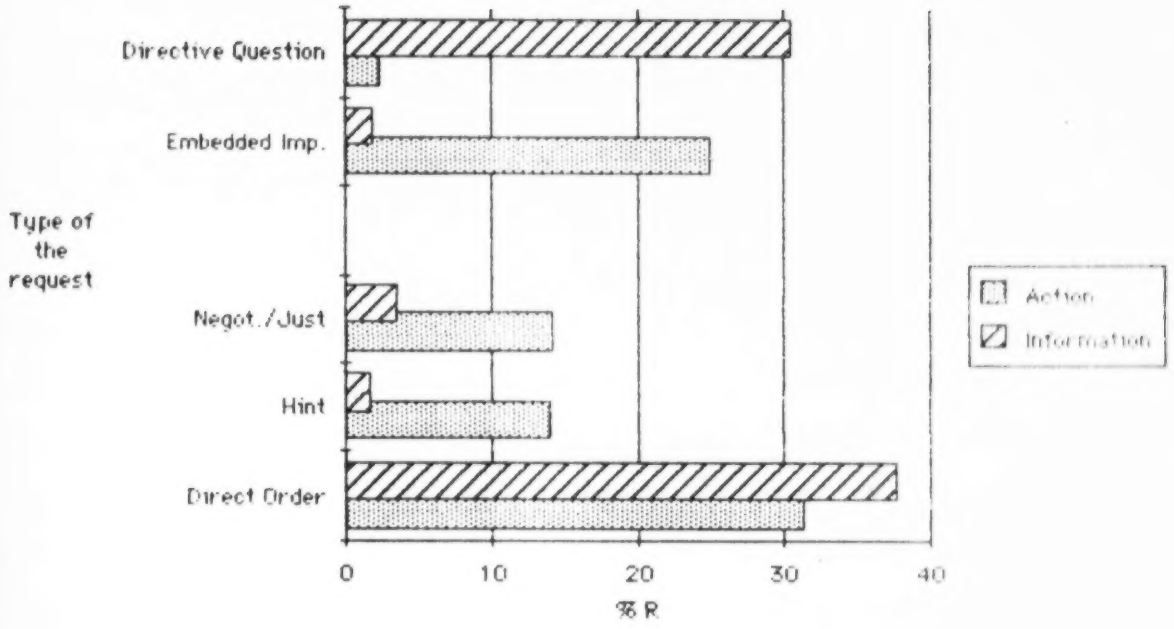

Figure 2 - Percentage of responses (% R) as a function of the nature and the type of the requests.

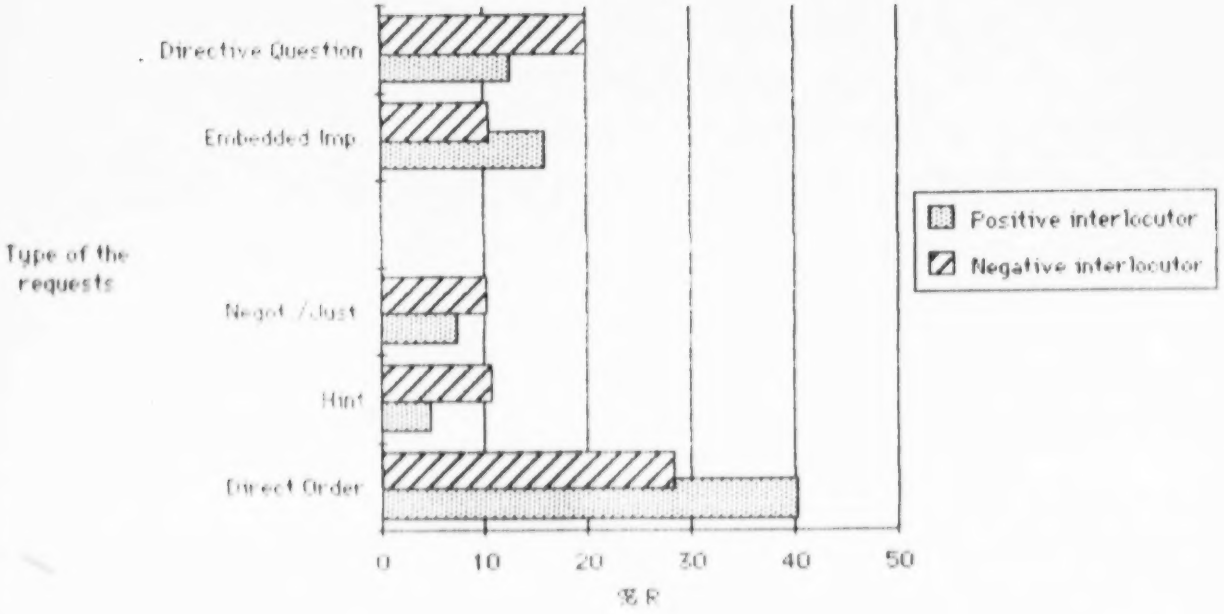

Figure 3 - Percentage of responses (%R) as a function of the interlocutor's status and the type of the requests.

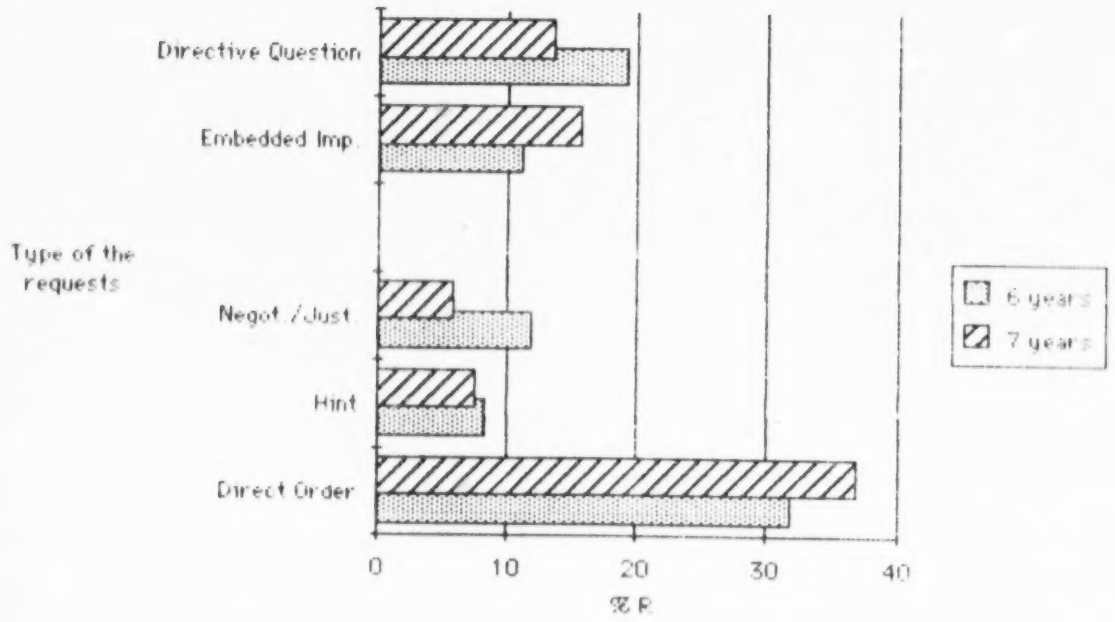

Figure 4 - Percentage of responses (% R) as a function of children's age and the type of the requests

Table 4 - Rewording of the request: number of responses for each category (going from the request 1 to the request 2) and each age group

Subjects'age Category of rewording	6 YEARS	7 YEARS	Value of the CHI-SQUARE ddl=1
1-Non request 2-Non request	20	18	.25 NS
1-Request 2-Repetition of 1	58	46	3.11 NS
1-Request 1-Non request	45	14	22.25 p<.001
1-Direct order 2-Indirect request	6	14	3.83 NS
1-Indirect request 2-Direct request	4	4	.004 NS
1-Request 2-Addition or cutting out of "please"	0	28	29.58 p<.001
1-Non conventional indirect request alone or combined with another type of request 2- Modification of the combinaison with at least one non conventional indirect request***	11	27	6.08 p<.01
TOTAL	144	151	

***Example 1**
First production: directive question
Second production: negotiation/justification + embedded imperative
***Example 2**
First production: direct order + negotiation/justification;
Second production: negotiation/justification
***Example 3**
First production: hint
Second production: directive question